

## LIMITATIONS ON MOBILITY

Most native-born and legal immigrant youngsters, even those from poor families, experience some level of intergenerational mobility. Most early exiters speak English with much greater ease than their parents, and most of them have exceeded their parents in educational attainment. But they and their parents expected much more for them. Because they are blocked from many of the opportunities available to their native-born peers and siblings, their adult lives look more like their parents', marked by a similar narrow range of options and numerous barriers to social and economic mobility.

Early exiters' resilience is a powerful testament to the ways in which they pushed back against the all-encompassing character of their immigration status. Their efforts to escape the grip of their status—even if only temporarily—were remarkable. They prioritized community and connection. They actively sought ways to belong by investing in relationships and by taking advantage of community spaces and activities. At the same time, they also came to realize that resistance required them to take risks (i.e., break the law) that their documented or native-born peers were free of. Overall, the challenges of being undocumented—the gauntlet of legal barriers, limited choices, and perilous environments—afforded them very few spaces unaffected by their illegality. In light of such risks, their daily choices were undertaken with the tacit acknowledgment of illegality as a master status.

## CHAPTER 7

## College-Goers

*Managing the Distance between Aspirations and Reality*

It is a Friday evening and unseasonably cold for mid-November in Anaheim. A dozen students crowd into the small downtown office space they rent from a local community group. The mood is serious, yet upbeat. Four of the students are sitting on folding chairs grouped around a small square table on which a large calendar rests. Another three are more comfortably seated on a worn couch that has been rescued from a nearby alley. Cell phones out, the students on the couch chat about school. Occasionally, they join the conversation going on at the table, offering their opinions or answering questions about their availability for scheduled activities. Several of the group's other members are hard at work making posters for a protest at University of California Los Angeles. Poster boards, markers, crayons, scissors, and wooden dowels are strewn across the floor. Lani, a small woman wearing a ribbed tank top, skinny jeans, and flip-flops, calls out, "Hey Esperanza, can you go with Tezca next week to a high school in Long Beach? There's a group of moms who have organized a meeting with the principal and some of the counselors, and they want us to present on going to college."

Esperanza, is hunched over a poster board in a hooded USC sweat-shirt she has procured from the lost and found; a brown knitted beanie covers her long, black hair. In blue and yellow marker, she traces the words "Shame on you UC Regents! You're Squeezing Us Out!" Esperanza responds, "Sure, what day is it? I've got more time now since I lost

my job. I just might need a ride, though. Someone ran into my car last week and I don't have any money to get it fixed."

This is an important moment. It is perhaps the first time Esperanza has openly asked the group for help. With a wide smile, Tezca, who does not drive, pulls a bus card out of his wallet. "It might take us longer to get there, but you can use this. I've got another one," Tezca and others in the group empathize with Esperanza's troubles. Humor, especially that which makes light of their circumstances, is often the best way to give comfort. Esperanza smiles back and asks, "What time do we need to be there?"

It was 2009, and I was visiting a group of students I had spent several years interacting with during my earlier fieldwork. Esperanza and I had first met in 2002, during her first week at the University of California; at that time she was shy, but she seemed very hopeful.<sup>1</sup> She had graduated in 2006, and in the years since, she had been engaged in advocacy and community work, piecing together paid work when she could get it and living with her father in a small, one-bedroom apartment. After graduation, life had not been kind to Esperanza, but she told me she felt "at ease when doing work that matters."

Esperanza spent more than two years feeling isolated at her University of California campus, where she did not know anyone else who was undocumented. Although she tried to contact student groups and to get involved in DREAM Act work, she could not find anyone who wanted to devote time and resources to making the issues she cared about a priority. In addition to her social isolation, she worried constantly about paying for tuition and books. These worries consumed her thoughts and made it difficult for her to connect with other students. During her senior year she met Cesar, the cochair of a local undocumented student group. Unlike Esperanza at the time, Cesar was "out" about his undocumented status and had found that he could motivate other undocumented students by sharing his story. Inspired by his commitment to bringing about change and impressed by what she learned about his organization, Esperanza decided to join. She spent the next six years working more than full-time hours, actively involved in community education and advocacy. This work gave her a sense of purpose and enabled her to put her education and skills to use. "I have been in so many clubs and organizations, especially the ones where you are helping other people, but this one is special," she told me. "[Our group] is a mix of people affected and not. I can actually help myself and others. I can change others' lives as well as my own."

Esperanza went on to become a leader in the organization. She gave workshops at high schools and trained other group members on how to speak with the media, particularly during protests. During a conversation we had in 2008, she reflected on her role in the 2006 immigrant rights marches in Los Angeles: "It made me feel part of something big, you know. I was part of that whole, and not just as a participant—I mean, not just someone who shows up to support [the cause]. I was actually part of organizing it. I was involved behind the scenes. You know, to me it felt really good to actually be able to do that and to be responsible for training people. It was pretty cool to, like, share like everything I knew with them, to play a big part."

On that November evening in 2009, while Esperanza's future was no clearer to her than when she was in college, she had a community of peers and a higher purpose to buoy her against the tide of lost jobs and her troubles. Nevertheless, the difficulty and stress she experienced in college had lasting effects. She was often guarded with her emotions and was reluctant to talk about her personal troubles to friends. In this chapter, I turn from the stories of early exiters who, alongside other undocumented immigrants, confront experiences of illegality in the workplace to those of the college-goers and their experiences navigating the world of postsecondary education. Combining assistance from key mentors at their schools and communities and a determination to succeed, college-goers brought with them to college an impressive support system and a long list of achievements. For Esperanza and other college-goers, making that transition from high school to college allowed them to maintain hope for their futures and provided important proof that their hard work and determination were paying off. On college campuses most continued to benefit from key sources of support that mediated many of the constraints of illegality. They found assistance through caring and supportive staff at their universities and a network of similarly positioned undocumented peers. Several, like Esperanza, drew support from and found a personally fulfilling sense of purpose in community and/or campus-based advocacy networks.

Still, college-goers found that moving from high school to institutions of higher learning brought numerous new challenges and forced them to confront the limits of their belonging. Contemporary studies of immigration tend to focus on intergenerational mobility, providing insight into questions about group-level success and equality of opportunity.<sup>2</sup> But while much of the immigrant incorporation literature highlights what immigrants do to acclimate themselves to host societies'

cultural and structural institutions, adaptation does not produce legal incorporation for undocumented immigrants. Adaptive decisions are circumscribed by larger contexts of exclusion that severely undercut efforts to belong. Thus, although many college-goers subscribed to narratives of meritocracy and positioned themselves to compete at selective colleges, graduate programs, and high-skilled jobs, their trajectories toward upward mobility had ceilings.

Drawing on the postsecondary experiences of the college-goers, this chapter makes clear that a lack of legal immigration status created enduring hardships, even within the fairly insular world of college. Like Esperanza, many college-goers experienced feelings of isolation during their postsecondary educational pursuits, and they felt similarly constrained by financial, administrative, and legal constraints. New environments, much larger student populations, and a rigid bureaucratic structure left many feeling out of place.

Additionally, navigating the complicated web of bureaucracy on their campuses also proved to be difficult and frustrating. Interactions with college officials who lacked information about undocumented students' rights or who were outwardly hostile hindered college-goers' momentum and weakened their trust in administrators. On top of these challenges, several students described financial hardships, such as difficulty meeting rising tuition costs, purchasing books, and meeting other school-related expenses. These financial challenges necessitated hard decisions about how to balance school and work. Many respondents experienced college as a series of forced stops and starts.

#### NAVIGATING THE POSTSECONDARY LABYRINTH

For college-goers, stepping onto their college and university campuses for the first time was a dream come true, the culmination of years of hard work and perseverance. As Esperanza put it, "It felt so sweet to be at the university. The first one in my family. To know that all the sacrifices, everything, it was all worth it."

When she first entered the University of California in 2002, Esperanza projected the enthusiasm of someone who had been given a second chance. Her high school years had been the best of her life. She was popular among her peers, competed in sports, and was a member of the high school band. But in 2000 her plans for a university education were abruptly curtailed when she discovered that as an undocumented student she was ineligible both for the in-state tuition rate and for financial

aid. With community college her only option, Esperanza felt like a failure. She decided to accompany her mother in a move to Wisconsin. Once there, to stay busy, she attended a local community college. When Esperanza moved back to California two years later, A. B. 540 was in place. She had earned enough college credits in Wisconsin to transfer with junior standing when she entered the University of California as an A. B. 540 student.<sup>23</sup> Esperanza was elated and anxious to get back on the path that had been so affirming in high school.

Like Esperanza, most college-goers in the study were the first in their families to go to college. In fact, only seven college-goers had a sibling who had been to college, and all but nineteen had parents who did not even finish high school, much less college. For them, higher education was uncharted territory. Going to college was considered a major accomplishment and a source of pride for the entire family. For most college-goers, it also meant a temporary respite from their responsibility to work full time and regularly contribute significant sums of money to meet household expenses. Most parents of college-goers, while financially strapped, tried as best they could to help their children be successful in their educational pursuits.

In sharp contrast to early exiters, who left high school for routines of hard labor and risk, those pursuing postsecondary education had a chance to distance themselves from the everyday strains of illegality. While a small number of universities and postsecondary systems across the country have banned undocumented students, federal law does not expressly prohibit undocumented students from attending institutions of higher education. As a result, going to college is one of the very few activities legally available to undocumented young adults.

On their university campuses, college-goers like Esperanza spent significant shares of their time in the company of other upwardly mobile young people pursuing positive and legally permissible goals. They dove into their college classes. Life felt calm and unthreatening, at least during the hours in which they were on campus. They got lost in the world of ideas, not weighed down by fears of deportation. They participated in extracurricular activities and engaged in activism. They made new friends. And they encountered a range of different perspectives. Their worlds expanded with each passing day.

Leaving behind the crowded environments of their homes and communities, college-goers like Esperanza soaked up the intellectual life on campuses with sprawling expanses of land and gardens, elaborate facades patterned in brick and limestone, ocean views, cafés, and palm-tree-lined

courtyards. Esperanza exclaimed, "I can say that I really love [the University of California]. Everything about it is nice. So calm and peaceful. I can actually think here. I have a lot of pride about this place. It's like a real university, you know. My parents never had a chance to go. I just feel really lucky to be here. Maybe not lucky, 'cause I worked really hard to get here. But it's like a real privilege to be able to go to school and to spend so much time in a place so beautiful."

#### *The Influence of University Structures on Students' Sense of Belonging*

California has been at the forefront of improving access to higher education for undocumented immigrant students. When legislators passed Assembly Bill 540 in 2001, California became the second state to offer in-state tuition to undocumented students attending public colleges and universities.<sup>4</sup> With higher education more financially feasible, college enrollment among undocumented students in California increased.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, undocumented students in California, particularly those of Latin American origin, face difficulties making successful transitions to college, persisting, and graduating. For example, annual statistics on the number of students receiving the A. B. 540 benefit within the University of California system point to disproportionately smaller number of Latino students taking advantage of the benefit compared to their undocumented Asian American counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the exclusion of all undocumented students from financial aid places these students at a distinct disadvantage all along the pipeline to and through college. Nearly 70 percent of all American students receive some form of financial aid. Despite coming from lower-income families than many of these students, undocumented students have limited access to this form of support.<sup>7</sup>

#### *The Challenges of Going to College*

The excitement Esperanza felt when she first arrived at the University of California did not last long. Before she met Cesar, Esperanza's time at the University of California was a struggle every step of the way. There was no organized group of undocumented students on her campus, so she did not have opportunities to meet and share stories with others in her predicament. This not only increased Esperanza's sense of isolation but also meant that she had no one with whom to share her frustration.

Unlike many of my respondents who benefited from student services staff, when she was seeking much-needed help Esperanza failed to connect with counselors or anyone else on campus whom she felt she could trust to help her penetrate the university's administrative bureaucracy. She became increasingly aware that she was different from her fellow students. Despite being in the insular world of college, Esperanza felt uneasy. She felt as though she did not belong.

Lacking access to financial aid put Esperanza in a tremendous bind. The cost of postsecondary education was dauntingly high.<sup>8</sup> Although paying tuition at in-state rates was a help, she had barely enough money to get through a full year. Like nearly every young person with whom I spoke, Esperanza could not rely on monetary support from her parents to offset legal exclusions from state-sponsored financial aid. An early decision not to work while going to college left her with very little other than the bare necessities. Given this difficult financial situation, she decided to cut corners as much as possible:

I couldn't depend on my parents for [tuition] support. I mean, I was a burden enough, mooching off my dad. During my first year, tuition and fees were over \$8,000. I had a few small scholarships, but it was hardly enough to get through the entire year. So I did everything I could just to stretch the little money I had. I didn't buy my books. I would check out all of the libraries in the area and I'd take the bus all around. Sometimes that took me two weeks, and I'd get behind in class.

Esperanza also decided to take public transportation, despite the inconvenience and time drain associated with bus travel in Los Angeles. These cost-saving strategies were not enough. It was not long before Esperanza joined the world of fast food work, piecing together minimum-wage jobs over the next few years to pay for school. Annual tuition hikes forced her to repeatedly recalculate her budget. Over time, she accumulated a debt that slowed her down considerably. By her senior year, Esperanza had run out of answers. She took a leave of absence to work so she could pay off her debt and have enough money to carry her through to graduation. It took her two more years to graduate.

For Esperanza and many other college goers, higher education presented several challenges. Even the brightest and most studious of the college-goers felt the ubiquitous constraints of illegality.

Most of the college-goers were still living at home. Unlike many of their middle-class native-born peers, this did not free them from financial concerns. Instead, they wrestled with the difficulties of balancing school expenses and time constraints against a responsibility to help

their financially strapped parents. Parents' low wages and mounting expenses forced them to pass some of the household financial burden on to their children.

#### Transportation Constraints

Transportation was an ongoing struggle for most respondents. Until January 2015, undocumented immigrants in California could not purchase a car, buy insurance, or legally drive.<sup>9</sup> Without a car, getting to and from school or work can be a major problem. In the sprawling metropolitan area of Los Angeles, public transportation prospects are few, limiting options for school (and work) and extending commute times.

For respondents, transportation presented problems they could not fully surmount. Though some college-goers attended community colleges closer to their homes, most had to adjust to long commutes, some more than two hours each way. Grace lived only seven miles from school, but getting to and from campus involved three buses (each way) and consumed one and a half hours of her time. To make it to class one time, she got up at 5:00 a.m. most mornings. Carlos, who lived in Santa Ana, took three buses to his school in Long Beach, a one-way commute of a little more than two hours. "I waste a lot of time on the bus," he told me. "It's time that I can't get back [to do] something productive. I can't read because I get carsick; and besides, in the afternoon the buses are full. Sometimes I stand for the whole ride. I can't work, either. That's like a part-time job I lose."

#### Time Constraints

For undocumented youth, attending college requires time-consuming effort. College-goers like Enrique and Cesar lamented that they missed out on the college experience. In particular, tight schedules created by the necessity to work or the amount of time needed to commute by bus cut into their available time to attend study groups or professors' office hours.

*Enrique:* Most of my classes were afternoon classes. They were the ones I could take because, you know, my schedule. But it was like, I was there for classes and that was it. I had to turn around and go right back home. Usually, in most classes, you know, for group projects, they wanted to get together at night, and I was either working or it was really far for me to go to. I usually had to do my part on my own. Explain to them I had no other choice. I really think that was a disadvantage for me.

*Cesar:* I definitely felt like a commuter while at [the University of California]. I went to my classes, to lectures and labs when I had them. After that, I would have to quickly drive to my tutoring job. I feel like I really missed out on the whole university experience. A lot of my friends had that. I wasn't in any clubs until my last year.

Cesar, whom I met in 2005, took the risk of driving. He told me that he carefully weighed the consequences of being stopped while driving against the time it would take him to get to campus using public transportation and the time (and money) he would lose by being in transit rather than working as a tutor.

#### Financial Balancing Acts: "It Feels Like I Can't Do Anything 100 Percent"

Many college-goers felt obligated to give back to their parents as a way of offsetting their loved ones' years of sacrifice. Others felt they had little choice. The money they provided their families, while burdensome, paled in comparison to what they would need in order to live on their own. In 2007 Scarlet was in her fourth year at California State University. When we spoke, she put the challenge of balancing adult independence with family obligations into real-life terms:

Because this is my last year at Cal State, my mom is worried that I'm going to get my own place. I can't do that right now. I mean, my job [at an ice cream parlor] pays me \$7.50 an hour and I'm only getting about twenty, maybe twenty-five hours [a week]. I pay my mom \$300, sometimes \$400 a month. That's a lot of my check, I guess more than half. I used to complain a lot, 'cause I didn't have any money left over after giving it to her. Now I just see it as another bill.

Scarlet and her mother were in a situation of mutual dependence, each relying on the other's income to make ends meet. Their San Bernardino apartment, while small, met their needs. But the rent was a major expense for Scarlet. Compared to early exiters, however, college-goers contributed much less of their income to their parents. In most households, parents asked less from their college-going sons and daughters. Most respondents told me they were responsible for smaller household expenses, like phone bills or cable and Internet fees. But very few received any financial support for college tuition and related expenses, and only six of the seventy-seven college-goers received money directly from their parents.

Most of the college-goers tried to find reliable ways of raising money for tuition—usually through a combination of private scholarships and part-time jobs. Even when these efforts succeeded, the accumulated costs of tuition, books, transportation, food, and clothing strained their already limited budgets. Managing multiple roles, responsibilities, and needs required a careful balancing act, especially when legal exclusions hampered the accomplishment of even the most mundane tasks. Lacking a predictable set of responsibilities and a stable source of funding, many college-goers experienced higher education as a series of stops and starts. “Stopping out,” or leaving college for a certain period of time with the intention of returning, is a growing, and concerning, trend among college students nationwide.<sup>10</sup>

In her sixth year at the University of California, Cory was little more than halfway through the coursework for her degree. Living on her own in Central Los Angeles, she worked to finance her tuition and living expenses. Going to school one term at a time, Cory found temporary jobs for the rest of the year to bank funds for the next term. Other undocumented students had different financial strategies. Carlos, a community college transfer student at a Cal State campus, spent a lot of time on small fund-raisers (raffles, bake sales, online donation requests) to meet the costs of school. His efforts were not always successful; budget shortfalls caused him to miss an entire semester. But his resolve to finish school allowed him to move past temporary setbacks.

Sometimes, despite their best efforts, when undocumented students come up short of funds, they must take time off from school to regroup. College-goers were remarkable in their optimism, but even they found difficulty comingling with the barrage of barriers that impeded their everyday lives. Without the help of financial aid, coming up with money for tuition, fees, and books was no easy task. While some, like Cory and Carlos, were able to find their way back to school, others discovered the pull of family need and a regular check too strong. Many failed to get back on track.

Despite assistance from high school teachers and community mentors, only a small number of respondents managed to move through higher education without financial struggles or interruptions. Most moved back and forth between school and work commitments, and almost half (thirty-six) left without earning a degree.

For some, this balancing act led to disastrous results. During Pancho's first semester at community college, his savings from work allowed him to cover tuition as a full-time student. He also had enough money

to pay for books and other related expenses. However, the next semester proved to be more challenging. While attending college full time, he could not make enough money to meet all of his costs. He cut back to half-time at school and took a full-time job as a parking attendant in downtown Los Angeles. His grades dropped. It became harder to leave his full-time job after he began to depend upon a larger paycheck to cover his own expenses and to help his mother. Pancho missed the fall semester. When he tried to go back to school in the spring, he enrolled in only one course. Even that was too much: he missed three classes during the first month and had to drop the course.

Pancho and I had several conversations during this period (between 2003 and 2005). He sincerely wanted to continue his education, but his financial circumstances made it a very difficult pursuit. He lamented, “It feels like I can’t do anything 100 percent. I mean, I’m doing everything myself. That’s fine, but without any help, it’s hard. The thing is, I’d like to be able to be a full-time student, but I can’t afford that. So I have to work, and working takes me away from being able to go to college. Maybe later, like in a few years, I’ll be able to be in a position to focus more on school.”

Pancho never returned to college.<sup>11</sup> His trajectory is not unusual. Nationally, only about one in five community college students successfully transfers to a four-year university. In California, the community college system enrolls roughly two-thirds of all the state’s college students (and nearly one-fourth of all community college students in the nation).<sup>12</sup> Growing numbers of undocumented young people are attending postsecondary institutions, but the vast majority of these begin at community colleges.<sup>13</sup> Like Pancho, many of these young people experience college as a revolving door.

Many college-goers who were competitive for the University of California chose to attend lower-tiered California State Universities. The Cal State campuses offered a college education for a fraction of the tuition at University of California schools. Some academically gifted college-goers avoided applying to UCs altogether, selecting only private schools with Cal States as a backup. When Scarlet was not accepted to Stanford, she was deeply saddened. But her disappointment grew when she was “forced to go” to Cal State:

It really got me down. I mean, I had this English teacher who encouraged me to apply to Stanford. She said that if I got in I could get most of [the tuition] paid for in scholarships. I thought it was a long shot, but I said, “Why not?” I knew I couldn’t get the same kind of deal at any of the UCs, so I only

applied to Cal States as a backup. When I didn't get in [to Stanford] I was stuck having to choose between Cal States. Don't get me wrong, I've had good experience, but for a while I felt really down.

*A Sense of Not Belonging: "I Kinda Felt Like a Ghost There"*

Several other respondents began college eagerly, at either two- or four-year institutions, only to leave without finishing. Like Pancho, most because they had trouble balancing multiple roles and responsibilities, but several others left college because they felt as though they did not fit in. Whether they attributed their uneasiness to their undocumented status or to perceptions about their race, they expressed feeling out of place on their large, impersonal college campuses.

*Sofia:* It just felt weird. I can't really pin it down to one thing. Like I didn't belong there. And it started bugging me after a while. I didn't have any friends there. I tried to talk to some of the girls in my class, but they were all stuck up.

*Fernando:* I just feel like I lost confidence. [College] was a struggle, like financially and everything. Not just that, though. It was more the rude comments by some of the administrators. Like I wasn't supposed to be there because of my [undocumented] status.

*Rogelio:* College was not for me. I'm not gonna lie. I halfway blame it on myself. You know, working all the time. I didn't really have any time to really be on the campus, like getting to know people, being comfortable with everything. I kinda felt like a ghost there. Basically, I just took classes, didn't talk to no one there. (Laughs) And no one missed me when I left.

A subset of the literature on belonging addresses young people's school experiences and the aspects of school environments that allow them to feel accepted, included, and supported in their school environments.<sup>16</sup> Much of this literature has focused on the problems of adolescents not feeling like they are a part of their high schools, but the findings apply to postsecondary experiences as well.<sup>17</sup> In particular, the observed links between lacking a sense of belonging and the predicted outcomes of diminished motivation, declining academic performance, alienation, feelings of disconnectedness, and ultimately withdrawal provide important clues for related experiences in institutions of higher learning.<sup>18</sup>

Most of the college-goers in my study had generally positive secondary and postsecondary school experiences. They were persistent and

hardworking, and they benefited from a variety of resources that helped them move through high school and college. However, reflecting broader trends among undocumented students, the pool of college-goers in my study shrank over time. Like Pancho, many who started postsecondary schooling left before receiving degrees. Unfortunately, it is that kind of downward trajectory that most closely resembles the reality most undocumented young people experience.

*Administrative Barriers: "Why Does It Have to Be So Hard?"*

While measures such as A. B. 540 facilitate educational access, their provisions are not always implemented on college campuses in a clear or consistent manner. Students admitted to state schools under A. B. 540 are required to submit a Statement of Legal Residence to the campus residence deputy. In support of the Statement of Legal Residence, it is common for the campus residency deputy to ask students to provide documentation of in-state high school attendance and graduation [e.g., copies of high school transcripts, diploma].<sup>19</sup> Their financial challenges and precarious legal status thus engender circumstances that put them into more frequent and fraught interactions with campus bureaucrats than are typical of other students.<sup>20</sup>

Meeting A. B. 540 stipulations and deadlines in addition to general admissions requirements and deadline results in multiple trips to and from the campus registrar and residency offices. Typically, there is very little coordination between offices and staff. Moreover, students are seldom assigned to one particular person responsible for dealing with their case. As a result, they often receive contradictory information. Along with other students, they wait in long lines, taking their chances that the next available staff person will be familiar with the specific circumstances relevant to their case.

The physical environment that structures encounters between college staff and undocumented students matters for these encounters. Most interactions between students and administrative personnel take place across a counter, and often through a glass window. Administrative staff members sit in offices while students wait in lines that often snake through indoor waiting areas before spilling out doorways and onto sidewalks. At some institutions, particularly at the beginning of the school term, there can be as many as seventy-five to a hundred students waiting in line at any given time. While there is usually a short distance separating the counter/window from the first person waiting in line,

conversations between administrators and students are often easily overheard by those waiting nearby.

Throughout the course of my study, I accompanied several respondents on campus visits as they attempted to complete their paperwork. During these interactions, I found that many of the front-line administrative workers did not have direct knowledge of A. B. 540 and were not familiar with other rights of the undocumented students on their campus. This lack of knowledge forced students not only to have to explain the laws but also to tell their stories in embarrassing detail within earshot of others standing nearby. Receiving services from the registrar, cashier, and residency offices required in-person visits in which the students had to divulge personal details about their financial situation, legal status, and family history. Many experienced these situations as frustrating and humiliating; others received treatment that felt hostile and threatening, as employees staffing the front desks engaged in blatant forms of discrimination. Multiple trips meant time wasted on long bus rides to the university, and some students even had to ask their parents to take time away from work to accompany them. Unless they were fortunate enough to have a knowledgeable companion, respondents navigated this complex bureaucratic process on their own.

Wendy, who started college in 2006, was one of the many college-goers who voiced their frustration over having to make multiple trips back and forth between the admissions and residency offices:

I think I talked with like five different people. I don't understand why they can't talk to each other. The last time I was there I was told that I needed another form. The time before I asked the woman if I needed the form and she told me I could do it online. But the man said that he couldn't do anything about my registration until I brought back the form. The same lady was standing behind him. I told him what she told me, but he didn't even bother to ask her. I couldn't help it, I started crying right there. Why does it have to be so hard? I don't understand.

During Tezca's sophomore year, he was told by a university official that as an A. B. 540 student he was eligible to make tuition and fee payments in installments throughout the semester (a financial arrangement that had been agreed upon at a meeting of university officials the week before). However, when Tezca went to the business office, the employee at the window handling payments brusquely informed him that there was no such policy. "He told me that I wasn't going to be able to register until I paid my full tuition. I tried to explain, but he wouldn't listen to me. So I got back in line and saw another person. She told me the

same thing. I got in line a third time, and finally the guy told me I had to go to the next window, just ten feet away."

Similarly, Vicente was turned away four times by staff at the residency office on his campus. On each occasion, he was told that he was missing a required form. He was later told that he did not need the form if he registered online. Each trip to the university required Vicente to take time off from his job and forego a whole day's pay. "I don't mind," he told me. "I mean, I'm excited that I am able to transfer to the university. I've worked very hard for this. But you know, they make you feel as though you don't belong. I'm going to give them everything they ask for. I'm not going to let this stop me."

In 2007, during a meeting of an undocumented student group in Camarillo that I regularly attended, Priscilla, a twenty-year-old undocumented community college student, shared with her peers a harrowing experience that almost caused her not to pursue college. When she was looking for a part-time summer job, a potential employer asked her for her California ID and Social Security number. Priscilla, who lacked both, was discouraged by her inability to get a job. She was going to abandon her plans to apply to college. Her mom and sister, however, persuaded her not to give up. "You have to go to school. You have to prove [people] wrong," they said. But when Priscilla tried to access her application through the online system she was notified that there was a hold on her registration because of questions regarding her residency status.

When I went, some girl attended me and she said, "We'll take it off. We just have to prove that you have papers." She went to the back and made me wait for a long time, and some other lady came and said, "What's the problem?" And I said, "I'm just trying to get my hold off so I can register for classes," and she just started being mean. She's like, "Are you legal?" And I said, "Yeah." And she's like, "Did you come here illegally?" And I just stared at her, and I was like, "What kinds of questions are those?" And she asked me, "Do you have a border pass? Do you have a border ID? How did you get here? How much did you pay for the coyote to come over here?" And I was just, I felt bad because I was gonna go to school and she was putting me down. I came to school happy and I came out really sad.

This humiliating incident kept Priscilla out of school for an entire year. The bureaucratic structure of the college's administration, which left little room for a humanizing approach, is partially to blame. But the communication of anti-immigrant sentiments from front-line staff also played a role. Tezca, the student who used information obtained through his positive relationship with a university official to advocate for himself



at the business office, recognized that negative experiences with front-line staff were harmful for many of his peers: "It's really unfortunate. The system has turned away a lot of A. B. 540 students because many of them are too scared to advocate [for] themselves or they don't know how to challenge these acts of discrimination. It gives them the message that they're not supposed to be here."

Young people recently out of high school are generally unfamiliar with the complicated and decentralized bureaucratic systems common at most institutions of higher learning. Given the stigma that attached to immigration status, this lack of familiarity translated to embarrassment, anxiety, and fear among students who had to account for themselves at multiple bureaucratic offices. Seemingly minor challenges at crucial entry points sent an unwelcoming message and slowed, stalled, or in some cases even fully derailed undocumented students' college plans.

Immigration laws prohibited undocumented students' participation in a host of college pursuits, including study abroad. In other cases, program requirements posed barriers to entry. Some internships and service-learning programs required applicants to submit a valid Social Security number and agree to a background check with fingerprints; credentialing and certification programs often required that students possess a state-issued form of identification and pass a state exam. College-goers therefore approached academic and extracurricular opportunities with trepidation.

Respondents' experiences in higher education shed some light on the university as a place that on one hand buffers illegality but on the other hand forces students to confront their legal limitations. Increasing numbers of undocumented immigrant students are making their way through college and thinking about postbaccalaureate options. However, it can be difficult for them to determine which postbaccalaureate education and training programs will be open to their participation. In this context, their experiences while on college campuses take on tremendous significance. It is clear that for some students university structures have aided and derailed students' career pursuits, as well as facilitated and closed off spaces of belonging.

#### THE CULTIVATION AND ASSERTION OF CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

Despite bureaucratic, financial, and legal barriers to their postsecondary plans, many college-goers found ways to persist. After all, the alter-

native—to be toiling in low-wage jobs, risking deportation and worsening their future outlook—was enough to make them work even harder. Central to their resolve was a belief that they belonged there. They staked their claims to belonging in their cultural citizenship.

The concept of *cultural citizenship*, first introduced by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, recognizes the agency of immigrant communities and the potential of immigrants as political subjects despite their limited access to formal political participation.<sup>20</sup> The term offers an alternative to the exclusionary nature of the dominant discourse of who "belongs," or who qualifies as "American" and highlights local, informal articulations of membership that take into account the broad range of activities and relationships in everyday life through which disadvantaged groups claim space, and eventually rights, in society.<sup>21</sup> For college-goers, evidence of their cultural citizenship and their right to belong was apparent in their various interactions on campus and the ways in which they leveraged sources of support to secure greater levels of access.

#### Getting Assistance from Student Services Offices

Indeed, the bureaucratic structure of postsecondary education is large, decentralized, and difficult to navigate. Many undocumented students forged relationships with college staff and administrators (especially those in student services) who provided them with the know-how needed to master the bureaucratic complexities of their institutions. Like some of their teachers and counselors in high school, student services staff helped these students access privately administered pots of money, provided them with key information, and advocated on their behalf.

On most college and university campuses, student services offices are oriented toward retaining students by improving their chances of success.<sup>22</sup> In addition to helping the student body at large, these staff members provide aid targeted to special needs, traditionally underrepresented, low-income, and first-generation students. Student services offices are often designed to encourage students to drop in, sit down, and meet with staff without restrictive barriers. These settings tend to be more intimate than the open counters and office cubicles common in other parts of university clerical and financial administration; a closed door offers students some level of privacy.

I noticed that in these offices students and staff alike often were on a first-name basis with one another and sustained long-term relationships.

Student services workers found creative ways to provide undocumented students on their campuses with internship opportunities and private scholarships. This was extremely helpful because prior to 2011, when state laws were finally revised, undocumented students were not eligible for any form of public financial aid. Staff members also helped college-goers surmount barriers that arose during their interactions with personnel in other campus administrative offices.

Tezca was ultimately able to make arrangements to pay his tuition in installments because he learned about the policy through his relationship with a key student services administrator. Armed with this knowledge, he did not accept the first roadblock presented by an ill-informed worker but instead persisted from a position of empowerment until he found someone who could help him.

Similarly, when Oscar had troubles with the residency office, he approached a staff member of his university's Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) to ask for assistance. "They were really cool about it. Yeah, two people from the office assisted me. Basically they went in there and explained everything to them. It saved me a lot of time."

As Enrique discovered, a lack of clear guidelines sometimes worked in the student's favor. Despite being told by an administrator within the teacher credentialing program at his California State University campus that he could not enroll in the program, Enrique, with help from a student services employee, was able to successfully complete the background check and pass the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST). He relayed to me, "We recently had discussions with the directors of the [credentialing] program during their open forums. A year ago they were appalled to learn that I had gone through the preliminary test [CBEST] and to learn that I was able to put my fingerprints through. Now they are deterring students from applying by insisting that without a Social [Security number] they won't be able to fulfill the preliminary requirements."

Through his campus's undocumented student support group, Enrique met two other students who were also in the process of obtaining their teaching credentials. All three students, along with the student services employee, met as a group to share information. They also went together—for mutual support—to meetings with university officials. They discovered on their own that no official policy stipulated that a tracking credential should be denied to an applicant without a Social Security number.

Rosalba was also able to complete her teaching credential with the help of a strong network of university employees and administrators.

The staff in the student services office at her university helped her to pore over the requirements for the state exams. And, with the help of the vice president of student affairs, Rosalba had her fingerprints taken at her university without being subjected to invasive questions about her lack of a Social Security number.

Though college-goers faced difficulty navigating the bureaucratic structure of their universities, they also benefited from student service offices developed to assist low-income and first-generation students. This kind of support bolstered their feelings of belonging and claims to membership.

#### *Advocacy and the Extension of Citizenship Claims*

Student services offices also benefited undocumented students by providing opportunities for these students to meet one another. In California, beginning in the mid-1980s, many college and university officials in counseling centers and admissions offices started to identify undocumented students and bring them together.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, much of the early activism on behalf of undocumented students was carried out by university officials. From these efforts, coalitions like the Leticia A. Network in California began to push for policy change, in-state tuition policies were crafted, and campus support groups began to take shape.<sup>24</sup>

As advocacy efforts in California began to pick up, gradually, students began to stand up for themselves.<sup>25</sup> Since the early 2000s, undocumented immigrant college and university students in California have organized local camps and community-based groups to provide mutual support, share resources, and advocate for inclusive changes in state and federal laws.<sup>16</sup> Following the immigrant rights marches of 2006, the number of these groups grew significantly.

Accompanying this growth was an increased visibility of undocumented students' plight and a growing sense of their political power nationwide. By 2009, they had compelled elected officials, university presidents, organized labor, the business community, and city councils across the country to cheer them on, provide public endorsements of their cause, and become better informed about their predicament. Several of these entities have publicly endorsed the DREAM Act.

I witnessed this growth in activism throughout the United States—in traditional immigrant-receiving cities like Miami and Chicago and in new destination areas like rural Georgia and suburban Colorado. In Southern California, during the later stages of my fieldwork, I observed

a pronounced increase in activity on community college, Cal State, and University of California campuses as once-isolated undocumented immigrant students began to find one another and form groups. These young people strategically used spaces of contradiction to claim social membership while also demanding expanded rights and formal membership. It was not long before they grew into a potent political force. Many college-goers had grown deeply frustrated with the limitations in their daily lives. They wanted to do something to bring about change, even at the risk of drawing public attention to themselves. Aided by immigrant rights organizations and elected officials, these groups formed a statewide coalition, partnered with California state legislators, and used diverse media sources to tell their stories.

Many of these young people made it clear that they were dissatisfied with the legislative process and had grown tired of waiting as others debated their futures. This restlessness, coupled with an increasingly clear vision of life without the protections and benefits of membership, motivated many to take actions they might otherwise have been unwilling to take. As Andrea explained in 2006: "This is our struggle. It's time for undocumented students to stand up for ourselves, and if we do not do it for ourselves, we will have lost everything we're fighting for."

#### *Asserting Belonging through Advocacy*

No single path led the college-goers into advocacy work. Neither was there only one reason for becoming involved. Many expressed the need for a community of support. Others said they wanted to take control over their lives. Over time, however, many of those who were involved began to realize their own capacity as agents of change and the importance of the space they were creating, not only for themselves but also for other community members. In their community and political practices, they began to exercise important forms of cultural citizenship.

These students' more public acts of protest generated the most attention to their cause. Equally important to these efforts was targeted outreach aimed at educating community members—teachers, counselors, parents, and students—not only about the challenges facing undocumented students but also about their rights.

Rosalba, an aspiring teacher when I met her, saw a great void among educators. Her weekly participation in school workshops was driven by a desire to change those "who are in a position to change lives." She reasoned, "I would like to raise awareness in the community because it's

really missing among educators in particular. There are a lot of good, really good, teachers that just don't have the information kids and families need, and that causes a lot of misinformation and missed opportunities. So that's why I participate. I would like to donate my story and be able to help out."

Many of the other college-goers publicly acknowledged what they referred to as privilege (i.e., being in college and not having to hold full-time jobs while in school). They tried to support other, particularly younger, students. Take Nimo, for example. As the beneficiary of a full scholarship from a sponsor who took care of all college-related expenses, Nimo was aware of his unique circumstances. Not needing to work to help his mom also freed up a great deal of his time. He kept his good fortune constantly in mind. People often were surprised by Nimo's level of optimism, something he used to educate and inspire others. He told me, "I believe that since I'm in this situation [I can] educate other people about the injustices that happen around the world. I think that it is a good way to change people's minds for the better and so there is a peace and justice in the world."

To be sure, these young people faced steep barriers to traditional forms of political participation. Historically, marginalized groups who have been denied access to traditional political power or whose interests have been shut out of traditional political channels have found extrainstitutional avenues to articulate their interests and seek change. These avenues include street protests, acts of civil disobedience, rallies, and marches.<sup>17</sup> College-goers engaged in political participation embraced similar methods. They held bake sales, car washes, and banquets to raise money for scholarships. They staged mock graduations to bring awareness to their plight. And they engaged in hunger strikes, sit-ins, and other acts of civil disobedience to escalate their battle for inclusive rights. These efforts, often tactics used as a larger national strategy, make them one of the most impressive social movements of the times.

While their actions may seem to others a foolish risk of their futures, many college-goers took a different view. They saw their activism as a way to stake claim to a political world long the exclusive domain of citizens. Marco explained his own and others' activism this way: "We've given a lot to this country. The youth, their talents, our community. We are not asking for special consideration, no handouts, nothing like that. But we demand respect, to be treated as equal members of this country. When we see parents separated from their children because of deportation, when we see our neighbors detained for making a questionable

lane change, when we see kids afraid to go to school, that's what motivates us to keep going. And we will."

The politically active college-goers articulated a sense of hope rooted in the ideals underpinning the educational system and based on a belief that, despite exclusion from the formal political system, they had the potential to change policy through their claims to membership as insiders.<sup>27</sup> By asserting their degrees and high grade point averages as well as their ties to their community, they demonstrated their merit as productive and contributing members. Even though invisibility is a defining characteristic of the undocumented experience, college-goers risked associations with visibility in order to assert claims of belonging on their college campuses and in the broader community. Growing numbers of undocumented immigrant students are moving through the educational pipeline, gaining exposure to a more inclusive world, and deliberately coming out of the shadows. Like early exiles, college-goers bring their agency to bear in their attempts to overcome isolation, loneliness, and other hurdles erected by their undocumented status.

#### *The Mixed Blessings of Broadened Horizons*

The notion of cultural citizenship provides social scientists and advocates alike with a model for understanding and asserting how individuals who are formally deemed outside the law can be recognized as legitimate political subjects claiming rights for themselves on the basis of their economic and cultural contributions.<sup>28</sup> It functions as a belief system and as a means through which those marginalized from formal membership, or whose formal membership is deemed of lesser value, are able to recognize their contributions and root their rights claims in social, economic, and political contributions.<sup>29</sup>

Cultural citizenship was the grounds upon which college-goers claimed membership based on years of accumulated Americanizing experiences and on their educational attainment.

Most college-goers included in their self-narratives examples that located them inside a culturally drawn circle of membership and community. Many tried to minimize the effects of legal outsidership by elaborating on the aspects of their lives that allowed them to actualize cultural membership. They emphasized their good grades and academic achievements. They doubled their efforts in their communities, giving workshops to parents and working with educators to help them better work with their immigrant students. They drew attention to elements of

their everyday lives—shared cultural experiences common to their generation of American-raised young millennials—that resembled those of their native-born peers. And they sought out opportunities to extend college life.

For example, some, like Cesar and his brother Oscar, pursued work opportunities that allowed them to replicate their lives on campus. Their tutoring business, which connected college students to low-income Mexican children throughout Riverside County, was so successful they were able to offer an eight-week science academy in the summer. Classes were held on a California State University campus with the support of one of Cesar's mentors, the vice president of student affairs.

Cesar was frequently invited to speak about key community topics.<sup>31</sup> I accompanied him to several community meetings where he was treated as an equal by adult community leaders. His perspective always seemed to be held in high esteem. As a group of us were driving back from a meeting where Cesar had spoken about the DREAM Act to a group of more than two hundred community members, a younger student expressed her surprise at the way in which Cesar carried himself during the meeting:

*Linda:* You're the man around here, aren't you?

*Cesar:* (Laughing) I don't know about that.

*Linda:* I mean, you're just like them. It's like your situation doesn't even get in your way.

*Cesar:* I try not to let my situation get me down. Don't get me wrong, I've really struggled, but I try to put that out of my mind. I'm always looking for opportunities to feel normal. You know, to shut out that side of my life. Most people are surprised when they find out I'm undocumented because I actually have a position of importance in the community. I may not be able to do everything they can do, but no one doubts that I should be at the table.

Cesar's attempts to "shut out" the aspects of his life that made him feel like an outsider was a strategy many college-goers used to maintain positive outlooks regarding their present lives and future possibilities. But Andrea adapted a somewhat different strategy for dealing with the stresses of undocumented life.

When we met, Andrea was the cochair of a campus organization for undocumented students. I was impressed by her leadership style—she was inclusive, but she also was a firm, no-nonsense leader. Largely through her leadership, her group participated in high-level discussions

within their community and city government, conversations historically reserved for established groups.

Andrea held her position as cochair for a little over two years. When she graduated from college, she was hired by a local not-for-profit group that found a way to support her position as an organizer by paying her as an independent contractor. I was taken aback when she left her job only months after starting. I was even more surprised when she began selling cosmetics. But within a few months she was managing a team of women selling cosmetics. The rationale for her decisions made sense:

*Andrea:* I feel like I'm finally putting my [sociology] degree to work. I'm successful at what I do, and I'm empowering other women just like me. Most of these women don't even speak English, and about 80 percent don't have papers. But they get to dress up to go to work, just like the women who work in offices, and they can be successful entrepreneurs.

*Roberto:* Yeah, that makes sense. But didn't you feel like you were doing that at your last job and with the [student group]?

*Andrea:* I don't know. Maybe. It's just that I never felt like we were, I was getting anywhere. It's like running into a wall over and over. And that got really tiring, you know. Last year was really bad for my health. I had to go to the emergency room twice because I thought I was having a heart attack. I realized that that work, I mean it's important, but it was time to pass it on to someone else. I was always thinking about my status. Every day, in my work, my personal life, at home. I needed to get away from it.

*Roberto:* And now?

*Andrea:* Now I can be a successful woman and kind of give some of that other stuff a break, at least for now. I feel much happier and healthier, like a big weight has been lifted.

While barriers related to their immigration status, economic limitations, and complicated college bureaucracies were often difficult to overcome, many respondents met legal obstacles with an optimism born of accumulated experiences of inclusion and success. The compulsion of many of these young people to engage in such activity in the first place merits further attention. Most college-goers entered college with the support of teachers, counselors, administrators, and other mentors. Their high school and college opportunities also provided them with powerful, horizon-expanding experiences, affirming their beliefs in American achievement ideology. Many used these experiences as leverage to assert identities that countered those of undocumented immigrants. And they consolidated small victories—full days or weeks of feeling normal, the successful navigation of campus barriers, and gains

made for undocumented students on campus or through legislation—into a portrait of their inclusion.

But for many, the desire to lead a normal life, coupled with the necessity to support themselves and take care of family members, overshadowed activist pursuits. By minimizing daily reminders of their undocumented status and normalizing everyday routines, they were able to assert some control over their circumstances, spend more time in regular pursuits, and reduce stress. During my time in the field I met many college-goers who cycled in and out of activist and advocacy groups, leaving when other aspects of their lives (e.g., paying bills, supporting family members, taking care of their health) took precedence. Nevertheless, returning to normal after years of inclusion and the excitement of activist pursuits was not something for which many were prepared.

In one conversation I had with Luis and a few of his friends after a campus meeting, Luis spoke in a frank and emotionally charged way about his fears of the future. He had no other plans but to return to his old neighborhood after finishing college. I followed up on some of the issues he raised. His response shed light on how large his world had become.

*Roberto:* What exactly about finishing college worries you the most?

*Luis:* To be honest, it's going home. Going back to my neighborhood. That's what gets me down. Don't get me wrong, I love my family and would do anything for them. It's just that in my time here at [California State University] I've grown a lot and done some really special things. Like my work with the counseling center. I've worked with a lot of the administrators. Earlier this year, I attended a luncheon put on by Student Affairs and sat at the same table as our [university] president. Last spring I got to go down to Louisiana with [a campus group] to help hurricane victims. I feel like things are really starting to happen for me right now in my life, and I know it's not going to be the same when I go back home.

Luis's comments reflect a sentiment common among young people who have left home. In fact, the theme that inspired Thomas Wolfe's posthumously published novel *You Can't Go Home Again* has entered the American lexicon as a shorthand reference to the difficulty of returning home after being away and seeing the world.<sup>32</sup> In addition to making clear the many ways in which college had altered his life, Luis's response clearly illustrates the extent to which colleges acted as spaces of inclusion and opportunity for undocumented students. But his concerns point to another, much darker, reality. Even after completing a college education and earning a degree, many college-goers are bound

to return "home," to illegality, a regressive slide into a life of limited choices and the ever-present threat of removal.

#### *Open Doors and Closed Windows*

The post-high school trajectories of the college-goers offer important evidence of the benefits of making it to college. The transition from high school to college is an important one for American students. College offers young people the opportunity to make important investments in their futures. For undocumented college-goers, this transition provided a buffer against the condition of illegality, although many college-goers shouldered heavy work responsibilities.

The postsecondary experiences of college-goers tell a mixed story. On one hand, many of these young people moved successfully through college and earned degrees—no small feat given the legal context that frames their adult lives. Along the way they found support from caring student services counselors who helped them navigate the difficult bureaucracy of their institutions. Many also formed connections with other undocumented students in similar circumstances. These relationships allowed them to share information about scholarship funds and campus resources as well as provide academic and emotional support. The support they received from college staff and undocumented peers enabled many to combat the damaging stigma that limited high school social and educational pursuits and to become more assertive in the claims of membership and belonging. Realizing their collective agency, they became a powerful political force.

An equally powerful counterstory also emerges from these narratives—a story of the university as a place of discrimination and difficulty for undocumented students. This story is often lost in popular narratives but is just as much a part of the undocumented experience. For many college-goers, financing their education and related expenses was a struggle at every step of the process. Restricted access to financial aid, work-study, and other key sources of financial and academic support severely handicapped their progress. Many college-goers felt as though forces beyond their control hindered their ability to leave college before completing their degrees, and many more received the message that they did not belong. Those who found support from student services staff were able to access spaces of belonging. However, many others experienced their campuses as cold and impersonal. While the experiences of college-goers appeared to diverge sharply their early-

counterparts, as the two groups moved farther into adulthood the differences between them began to disappear. As the next chapter vividly illustrates, for early exiters and college-goers alike, illegality is a constant status for undocumented adults.

College-going undocumented young adults have become the face of the immigrant rights movement. By pointing out the very real legal barriers to upward mobility, college-goers appeal to ideals of deservingness traditionally tied to merit and achievement. The framing of undocumented youth as innocent children or as truly American has proven such a successful strategy for the promotion of their deservingness that it has become the basis for this group's full legal inclusion. In his book *We Are Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream*, William Perez argues, "They have grown up 'American' in every way possible; their dominant language is English, they proclaim an American identity, and they live an American lifestyle."<sup>11</sup>

In many ways the college-goers are different from early exiters, who cannot as easily be portrayed as "deserving." Many of the aspects of merit and achievement that have been used to define their deservingness also separate them from their own siblings and other family and community members. Many indeed "grew up American." However, their everyday adult lives remind us that, like early exiters, they too are stigmatized, excluded, and offered only partial access to the American dream. For both groups their lack of formal permission to be in the United States challenges claims of deservingness that rely on false dichotomies.